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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

Baltimore, February, 1890.

## ROBERT BROWNING.

ROBERT BROWNING was born in 1812, just three years later than ALFRED TENNYSON. BYRON was then in the maturity of his fame; SCOTT was abandoning poetry and was preparing himself for the production of his historic romances, the fruitful inspiration of succeeding artists in all spheres of literary evolution from BULWER to CARLYLE, MACAULAY, FROUDE and GREEN; COLERIDGE had passed into the philosophical and critical stage of his career; WORDSWORTH was still under the shadow of adverse and indiscriminating criticism; SHELLEY had not attained his climax; the name of KEATS was scarcely yet known. In 1833, when BROWNING was twenty-one years of age, "Pauline," his first poem, was issued and scarcely attracted the attention of professional critics. "Paracelsus" was published in 1835, and "Strafford," which despite all the efforts of MACREADY'S genius failed to achieve a dramatic success, appeared in 1837. Then followed a long and brilliant series of creations illustrating almost every phase of intellectual activity, every epoch of human history—a series that closed only with death.

It is beyond the scope of an ordinary article to dwell in detail upon the varied and versatile productions of ROBERT BROWNING. Any one of his more elaborate achievements—such as "The Ring and The Book"—might exhaust the possibilities of the rarest criticism. We must be content to take a lower range and strive simply to show what are the masterful characteristics upon which BROWNING'S fame must abide through all fluctuations of taste, through every variation of poetic form. First, he is the poet of the spiritual life—the "subtlest assertor of the soul in song." The deep and obstinate questionings of invisible things are portrayed as by no other hand. All human life, all earthly conflict, are but the dim foreshadowing of a purer revelation of which the things that now are form the faint and feeble allegory.

"On the earth the broken arcs; in the heavens a perfect round,  
All we have willed or dreamed or hoped of good shall exist,  
Not in its semblance but itself."

The charge most persistently urged against BROWNING is obscurity—hopeless, impenetrable obscurity. That the allegation is in a measure just, even his most enthusiastic admirers must acknowledge. Yet it is equally true that the poet is not wilfully, or even consciously, obscure; the light that is in him is not darkness, though it sometimes lack brilliance through imperfection in the transmitting medium. The noblest types of art, literary or plastic, do not reveal their full measure of rich suggestiveness to the merely casual student; the highest poetry is as much the appropriate subject of patient scrutiny and critical investigation as the science of mathematics or of astronomy. To most of us the high function of "fathoming the poet's mind" is not vouchsafed. The "vision and the faculty divine" may see eye to eye, where we behold dimly and in figure. Equally true is it that BROWNING cannot be assigned a place in the goodly company of artistic poets, the sovereigns of form, such as GRAY and TENNYSON, who have striven after the ideal symmetry of the Greeks. Though fashioned mainly amid the cold and sedate environments of the Victorian era, he has claimed all times as his spoils and taken all forms of development as his province. In vigor and audacity of expression, in bold and daring ellipsis, in the conservation of ancient but idiomatic forms, he may be ranked with the masters who illustrated our language during the XVI. and XVII. centuries. To illustrate this general proposition in detail would expand this article beyond all rational limits. We may specify, however, his frequent employment of the rhematic *to*,—as "to only signify" ("A Blot on the 'Scutcheon'"); "to tamely acquiesce" ("Colombe's Birthday"); "to really be" ("Waring"); "to merely have" ("A Blot on the 'Scutcheon'"). Many other illustrations might be cited, but these are sufficient for our purpose. The construction, though occasionally employed by our poets, is almost unknown in SHAKESPEARE'S rich and complex English. In "A Blot on the 'Scutcheon'" we find *fore-done*, so well known to students of SHAKESPEARE and of our old literature from the

Anglo-Saxon age. In "Colombe's Birthday," Act v, we find an ancient English idiom which survived in literature until the XVIII. century; it may be found in BENTLEY's famous dissertation, and it still exists in provincial usage. We refer to the employment of the double negative to emphasize the negation. In the passage referred to BROWNING writes: "Let me not do myself injustice neither." In "Rabbi Ben Ezra" we have the word *irks* used in its olden personal sense,—"*irks* care the crop full bird." This impersonal use of the term survives in some portions of the Southern States. In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" we have a singular use of the word *skills* in the sense of 'boots' or 'avails,'—"It nothing *skills*, I cannot help my case." The student will find it suggestive to compare with this the sense in which the same word is used in I. Kings, v, 6,—"*there is not among us any that can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians.*" In "The Boy and The Angel" we find the word *dight*, employed by MILTON in at least one immortal passage, to say nothing of its use by other masters of our literature. The word *dartles*, in "My Star," is possibly the poet's own coinage. *Emprise*, "Colombe's Birthday," Act iii, though noted by BROWNING commentators as rare, may be regarded, we think, as an accepted usage. It is perhaps strange that critics have failed to note the identity of the ortolan, of which the poet seems to have been especially fond—see "Prologue to Ferishta's Fancies"—with the well known rice-bird of the Southern States. In the "Flight of the Duchess," xiv, we have the word *usurpature*,—"as if age had foregone its *usurpature*;" *discept*, "Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha" xiv, "Two must *discept*;" *usurpature* in the same poem, xxiii; *vociferance*, xv, "All now is wrangle, abuse and *vociferance*;" xvi, *crepitant* and *strepitant*,—

"Two retorts, nettled, curt, *crepitant*,

Four overhears them all strident and *strepitant*,"

*Pleasure* is used as a verb, "Abt Vogler" i,—

"And pile him a palace straight, to *pleasure* the princes he loved."

*Cited* is to be noted in "A Grammarian's Funeral."—

"*Cited* to the top, crowded with culture."

*Suave* has a physical or sensuous signification,—"The *suave* plum, ("Cleon");—*indue* has the primitive sense of 'to put on,' in "Rabbi Ben Ezra,"—

"What weapons to select—what armor to *indue*."

*Centuply-angled* occurs in "Numpholeptos,"—"Centuply-angled as a diadem;" from the same, *petrific*,—

"The old statuesque regard—the sad *petrific* smile,"

an expression marked by rare quaintness and rare power. Such forms as *wot*, *a-cold*, *a-strain*, *a-dare*, occur repeatedly but require no special comment, as their parallels are to be found in every age of our poetry.—*Lamp* is used as a verb in "One Word More," xv,—"*Full she flared it, lamping Samniato.*"—*Bicker* occurs in "A Forgiveness,"—

"That a blade should writhe and *bicker* like a flame."

The student will find it suggestive to compare BROWNING's use of the word with the meaning it has in the old English and Scotch ballads;—*coëtaneous* ("Cenciaja"),—"The *coëtaneous* dames in youth and grace;" xv,—*assiduous* in its etymological sense 'sitting down to,'—"And now assiduous at his post;" note also the use of *tentative* in the same poem;—*fire-new* meaning 'brand-new' ("Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"),—"With a *fire-new* spoon we are furnished."—Is not the Abbott *Deodaet* in "The Heretic's Tragedy" suggested by the famous DEUSDEDIT of early church history? It is well known that such compounds as *Deogratias*, *Deusvult*, *Deodatus*, etc., were in familiar use, especially during the Donatist controversy, and they seem to have been the prototypes of Praise-God Barebones, God-be-here, and their partisans of the English Puritan dispensation;—*misfeasance* ("Before," vi),—"And the price appear that pays for the *misfeasance*;"—*dree*, 'to bear or endure,' marked obsolete or provincial by WEBSTER ("Old Pictures in Florence," xxv),—"Why not reveal while their pictures *dree*." In xxxv of the same poem there is a graceful allusion to MILTON's well known line: "To end now our half-told tale of Cambuscan;"—*mort-cloth* ("The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church"),—"And let the bed-clothes for a *mort-cloth* drop;"—*lovelily* ("Flight of the Duchess,"

xvii),—"And poured out all *lovelily, sparklingly* sunlit;"—*star-shine* ("The Last Ride Together," iii),—"Cloud, sunset, moonrise, *star-shine* too;"—*derive*, used intransitively in the sense of 'descend, or proceed from' ("Old Pictures in Florence," viii),—"Da Vincis *derive* in good time from Dellos"; the same use of the word may be found in the essays of WALTER PATER and the late MARK PATTISON (see PATTISON'S 'Essay on Calvin at Geneva,' vol. ii, p. 16, "It—Puritanism—*derives* directly to this country from Geneva").—Peculiar is the use of *unimpeached* ("Women and Roses," iii),—

"Thy leaf hangs loose and bleached;  
Bees pass it *unimpeached*;"

*flare* is used as a noun ("Bishop Blougram's Apology"),—"Men call *flare* success. In the same poem are found *Decrassify*,—"Eliminate, *decrassify* my faith"; *Stuccotroidlings*,—"Ciphers and *stucco-troidlings* everywhere"; *erie*,—"It's like those *erie* stories nurses tell"; *Ichor*,—"The child feels God a moment, *ichors* o'er the place." *Cheatery*,—"Surely not downright *cheatery*" ("Mr. Sludge, the Medium"); *umber*, common in SHAKESPEARE, and *bistre*,—"The outworn *umber* and *bistre*; *odic*,—"Rubbed *odic* lights with ends of phosphor-match;"—*demirep* ("Bishop Blougram's Apology"),—

"The superstitious atheist, *demirep*  
That loves and saves her soul in new French books;"

*fore-went*,—"Threw club down and *forewent* his brain beside"; *creased*—used in a figurative or tropical sense—

"While the great bishop rolled him out a mind  
Long rumped, till *creased* consciousness lay smooth."

The reference to "Dowland's lute" ("Bishop Blougram's Apology") acquires an additional charm in view of MR. BULLEN'S recent publications, which have done so much to revive an interest in one of the noblest lyrists of the Elizabethan time, in whom "music and sweet poetry agree." Yet how many of us knew him save as a mere memory, until he was recalled to appreciation by the invaluable labors of MR. BULLEN? The examples that have been given as illustrative of the characteristic features of BROWNING'S English might easily be developed into a special treatise. The object, however, has

not been to exhaust investigation, even were that possible, but merely to stimulate and quicken more elaborate and minute research. With all his grasp of language, BROWNING sometimes displayed a singular lack of appreciation of the historical or philological side of English. This is illustrated by his strangely perverse view in regard to such ancient and reputable idioms as *had rather, had better*,—a view at variance with every teaching of scientific or comparative grammar,—and his flagrant error in regard to the meaning of the word *twat* (see MOD. LANG. NOTES iii, 235),—a misconception that might have been avoided by a simple reference to WRIGHT or HALLIWELL. Not quite so deplorable is his blunder in the use of *slug-horn*, (see "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"), which SKEAT has pointed out in his 'Principles of English Etymology,' pp. 447-448. Yet with his lack, in some conspicuous instances, of philological discernment or attainment, his poetry rises to occasional climaxes of power and intensity such as no singer of our century has surpassed. That he possessed the art-faculty in so masterful a measure of endowment, renders us all the more regretful for his frequent abdications of this august prerogative of the poet. No reader of "Colombe's Birthday," "Abt Vogler," "Pippa Passes," "A Blot on the 'Scutcheon," "Old Pictures in Florence," "My Lost Duchess," the "Invocation from the Ring and the Book" and the songs in memory of MRS. BROWNING, can question that his artistic gift was one of the ripest and rarest bestowed upon any singer of our era. We are inclined to the opinion that his shorter poems, in which condensation of language is a necessity, exhibit his power in its most attractive and abiding form. The Italian Renaissance, with its æsthetic orgies, its grotesque blending of Pagan and Christian ideals, is delineated in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" with such subtle appreciation of the inner life of that epoch as to elicit unqualified eulogium from the most capable and the most captious historians of art. The strength and the weakness of WORDSWORTH are portrayed in a few touches, as the "Lost Leader,"—"pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne,"—passes in

review before us. Exquisite pathos mingles with radiant loveliness, as the dawning life of "Evelyn Hope" enters into the congenial fellowship of seraphs and angels. No more graphic exhibition of the pure and hallowed life of the student has ever been made than "A Grammarian's Funeral." It is the scholar's anthem for all ages. No more thrilling stanzas have ever been produced than "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." We are moved by it "more than with a trumpet;" in times of waning hope, in seasons of apparent failure its last notes are an inspiration. In "A Tale" we have a possible echo of long-gone melodies, as the work of BROWNING, though different in aim and issue, may have been suggested by The Musical Duel of FORD or CRASHAW. The influence of our poet's long life in Italy is visible in many characteristics of his poetry. English gravity is tempered by Italian æstheticism—a truth recognized by RUSKIN in his contrast between the art-sense of SHAKESPEARE and that of BROWNING.

That BROWNING's power over the minds of successive ages will increase with the expansion of culture, we doubt not; that he will always be the cherished oracle of an esoteric circle, we are equally assured:

"Since Chaucer was alive and hale  
No man hath walked along our road with step  
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue  
So varied in discourse."

H. E. SHEPHERD.

College of Charleston, S. C.

### LA COMÉDIE EN FRANCE AU XVIII<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE.

Dès qu'on mentionne le mot *Comédie*, tout de suite la figure immortelle de MOLIÈRE nous apparaît. Il semblerait que cet homme s'élève à une telle hauteur qu'il cache dans son ombre tous ceux qui ont osé écrire après lui dans le genre comique. Tel est presque le cas, et c'est avec difficulté que l'on aperçoit d'autres hommes derrière MOLIÈRE. Faisons-les approcher un peu, et nous verrons de charmantes physionomies, des figures fines et spirituelles. Ils s'avancent: observez leurs manières élégantes et polies, leurs brillants costumes, leurs cheveux poudrés, et vous reconnaîtrez les

hommes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, hommes frivoles et sérieux à la fois, comme le siècle dans lequel ils vivaient, siècle qui commençait par la Régence et ses petits soupers et qui finissait par la Terreur et sa guillotine.

Le premier auteur qui doive nous occuper est REGNARD. Quoiqu'il naquit en 1656, il est réellement du dix-huitième siècle par le style de ses écrits, style léger, artificiel même, mais toujours amusant. C'est à peine si nous pouvons reconnaître en REGNARD, le successeur de MOLIÈRE, si nous lisons "le Misanthrope" ou "le Tartuffe;" mais nous voyons dans "le Joueur," dans "le Distrain," dans "les Menechmes," la bonne et franche gaieté de "l'Étourdi," des "Fourberies de Scapin," du "Médecin malgré lui."

"Le Joueur" est le chef-d'œuvre de REGNARD, la pièce est intéressante depuis le commencement jusqu'à la fin, le dialogue est vif et animé, et le vers est bon. Tout le monde connaît l'amusante apostrophe de Valère:

"Tu peux me faire perdre, ô fortune ennemie?  
Mais me faire payer, parbleu, je t'en dédie."

Il adore sa belle quand il n'a plus le sou et il s'écrie: "O charmante Angélique!" mais que celle-ci, dans son aveuglement, lui donne son portrait enrichi de diamants, il se hâte de le mettre en gage et il retourne au jeu avec une nouvelle ardeur:

"On le peut voir encor sur le champ de bataille;  
Il frappe à droite, à gauche, et d'estoc et de taille;  
.....  
Maudissant les hasards d'un combat trop funeste:  
De sa bourse expirante il ramassait le reste:  
Et, paraissant encor plus grand dans son malheur,  
Il vendait cher son sang et sa vie au vainqueur."

Voilà un beau récit d'un combat autour d'un tapis vert. Ne croirait-on pas voir le Cid courant contre les alfanges des Maures, à "l'obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles," au milieu des horribles mélanges du sang chrétien et du sang païen et faisant les deux rois prisonniers? Hélas! pour Valère, comme pour Rodrigue, "le combat cessa faute de combattants." Lorsque ses derniers écus eurent succombé, il sentit redoubler son amour pour Angélique et il courut se jeter à ses pieds. Il était arrivé trop tard; Angélique, ayant appris l'histoire du portrait, donne sa main à Dorante, l'oncle de Valère, et celui-ci se retire sans avoir au-